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ABSTRACT

Qualitative research techniques were used to explore questions of pedagogy and lived student experience in two English secondary schools that have given multicultural education a high priority. The paper focuses on the roles and experiences of students aged 11 to 16, examining their pivotal role in supporting and extending antiracist developments. The position of white students in these schools highlights dilemmas in antiracist theory and practice. Their reactions to antiracist change are examined, and the attempts of the schools to involve them positively in antiracist developments are described. The paper concludes with a discussion of the concept of white ethnicity. On both sides of the Atlantic, constructions of whiteness are often constrained by rightist, nationalist, and racist discourses. If antiracism is to challenge these ideologies, a pressing task is to address the idea of whiteness itself and to identify new emancipatory discourses such that white students can find a legitimate voice and role in antiracist struggles. One figure summarizes some student responses. (Contains 48 references.) (Author/SLD)

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the crisis of white ethnicity in multicultural schools: hearing student voices

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First draft - comments welcome

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Writing on race and education (in the United States, Britain and elsewhere) has tended to neglect questions of pedagogy and lived experience at the school and classroom level. The paper begins to redress this by using qualitative research to examine schools that have given multicultural issues a high priority. In particular, the paper focuses on the roles and experiences of students (aged 11-16) and explores their pivotal role in supporting and extending antiracist developments. The position of white students in these schools highlights dilemmas in antiracist theory and practice. The paper examines white students' reactions to antiracist change and describes the schools' attempts to involve them positively in the developments - forcing teachers to re-evaluate their assumptions about the nature of race and racism. The paper concludes with a discussion of the concept of white ethnicity. Antiracism is opening up new and important debates about ethnicity and identity in education - debates that can sometimes seem to exclude white students. On both sides of the Atlantic, constructions of whiteness are often constrained by rightist, nationalist and racist discourses. If antiracism is to challenge these ideologies, a pressing task is to address the idea of whiteness itself and to identify new emancipatory discourses, such that white students can find a legitimate voice and role in antiracist struggles.

Introduction

> You can't put yourself in their skin.
> You can empathize as much as you like, but at the end of the day, you can walk away from it because you're white.

This is how a white teacher explained to me her professional commitment to engage with the views and experiences of minority students. The interview was part of a two year qualitative research project examining the development of antiracist education in two English secondary schools that have established national reputations for their work in this field. Here the teacher speaks about her relations with students and seems to see her own ethnicity (her whiteness) as a barrier to understanding; she recognizes that, in a very real sense, she cannot experience the pain and exclusion that minority students suffer as a result of racism. This perspective emerged as an important aspect of teachers' attempts to understand the racial structuring of inequalities in society, and to reflect critically on their own assumptions and actions as whites. The same perspective, of course, has consequences for how teachers view their white students; as at once privileged by their majority status while simultaneously denied a full voice in antiracism on the very same grounds. This raises difficult but crucial questions which have, until recently, been ignored by most writers and practitioners in the field.

This paper focuses on the roles and experiences of students (aged 11-16) in schools that have consciously addressed issues of cultural pluralism, the development of multicultural curricula and the exploration of antiracist teaching strategies. Key questions concern the way that different students (separated not only by ethnicity, but also by gender and social class) experience and respond to such changes; *How do students view multiculturalism? Is it inevitable that antiracist and multicultural changes empower some groups while seeming to victimize others? What role is there for white students in opposing racism?*

Some of the most fundamental questions concern the understandings of race and difference that shape schools' attempts to work constructively on multicultural issues. Put simply, *do the conceptual frameworks that underlie the innovations make sense in terms of students' daily experiences? If not, can students' voices make a positive contribution to the development of more sophisticated school policy and pedagogic practice?* Recent advances in theorizing the complexity of identity in late modernity offer a new and potentially useful perspective on the making and breaking of racialized subject identities. The paper addresses the connections between such theoretical perspectives and the understandings of race and racism at work in the schools under study.

Multiculturalism, antiracism and the school

The importance of race and ethnicity in education is increasingly recognized across the major Western educational systems, not least because of the active campaigning of minority groups themselves. Yet the sheer variety of educational perspectives can sometimes act to discourage progress and block attempts at

cross-cultural comparison. In a review of books and articles about American schools, for example, Sleeter and Grant (1990) identify five different understandings of the term 'multicultural education', sometimes reflecting fundamentally different positions (see also Gibson 1976). In Britain the debate is scarred by a long-running (often bitter) dispute between 'multiculturalists' and 'antiracists'; the former tending to emphasize a liberal-humanist approach to curricular matters, the latter more concerned with radical analyses of power and direct challenges to racism (see Brandt 1986; Gillborn 1990; Troyna 1992). A similar division has emerged in some Australian work (Rizvi 1988), while academics and practitioners in New Zealand and Canada have also developed some distinctive approaches to cultural diversity and 'Ethnocultural-Equity' (Corson 1993; Friesen 1993; Ontario Ministry of Education 1993). Unfortunately, a common element in much of this work has been the neglect of school-based issues, complexities and uncertainties in favour of more abstract theorizing (sometimes polemic) about what should/should not be done. This kind of closed and certain analysis is, however, increasingly out of step with developments in research and theory.

Theorists, on both sides of the Atlantic, are increasingly emphasizing the fluid and fractured nature of identity. They highlight ways in which ideas about class, race, culture, gender and sexuality are continually made and remade, often in contradictory and ambivalent processes, so that racism becomes a much more complex and dynamic issue than is usually assumed (Aronowitz and Giroux 1991; Brah 1992; Donald and Rattansi 1992; Hall 1992a; McCarthy 1990; McCarthy and Crichlow 1993; Omi and Winant 1986). These advances allow us to examine the changing and multifaceted nature of ethnicity within specific contexts, sensitive to intra-group difference and contestation. A good deal of ethnographic research has already revealed the complex interplay of identities at the school level. Here ethnic identities are explored, not as historically fixed and handed-down, but as continually negotiated through the situated actions of students and teachers. At certain points, for example, minority students with diverse ethnic backgrounds might mobilize jointly around a shared political identity as victims of white racism; at other times they may emphasize differences - based on gender, class, religion, sexuality etc. (see Gillborn 1995a & b; Mac an Ghaill 1988; 1989; Modood *et al* 1994).

These developments subvert traditional antiracist approaches that (in an attempt to oppose white racism) have tended simply to invert racist stereotypes. Despite their radical intentions, such perspectives frequently embody patronizing notions of homogeneity and caricature people of colour as one-dimensional powerless victims. As Stuart Hall notes, the rejection of such images - although uncomfortable for some - opens new possibilities for social analysis and political mobilization:

> You can no longer conduct black politics through a strategy of a simple set of reversals, putting in the place of the bad old essential white subject, the new essentially good black subject. Now, that formulation may seem to threaten the collapse of an entire political world. Alternatively, it may be greeted with extraordinary relief at the passing away of what at one time seemed to be a necessary fiction. Namely, either that all black people are good or indeed that all black people are *the same*. (Hall 1992b: 254, original emphasis)

This perspective lays the analytic foundations for a more critical and sensitive examination of the significance of race and ethnicity at the school level. It is not restricted, however, to the analysis of minority group experiences and identifications: the same perspective can be applied to white actors - breaking down essentialist notions of a single one-dimensional white subject and allowing for a more critical, and sensitive, exploration of the social construction, meanings and consequences of white ethnic identities.

White people occupy a strangely ambivalent position in much writing on multicultural and antiracist education. Whites are rarely addressed as a specific racial group. As with the representation of whiteness in film and other media, academic work frequently assumes white to be the norm, requiring no further examination (Dyer 1988; hooks 1991). And yet almost all work on multicultural and antiracist education is underpinned by tacit, sometimes contradictory, assumptions about whites. On one hand they are assumed to be the main agents of change (most teachers and administrators are, after all, white); On the other hand, white people are also taken to be a major obstacle to progress - indeed, some writers adopt a theoretical position that explicitly defines racism solely as a property of white action against blacks. According to such analyses, 'attacks of whatever form' by people of colour against whites and/or other minority groups *cannot* be defined as racist (Troyna and Hatcher 1992: 16). It is only recently that academics have begun to pay serious attention to the construction and experience of white ethnicity in multicultural settings (Bonnett 1993; Mac an Ghaill 1994; Roman 1993; Solomos and

Back 1994). This is a vital development since most agree that multicultural and antiracist strategies cannot enjoy widespread success without the active involvement of white people.

Researching antiracism at the school level

This paper is based on a two year long research project that sought to move beyond the confines of previous British research on antiracism. Multicultural and antiracist texts tend to be high on polemic and low on practicalities. There is an absence of the messy and painful micropolitical struggles that characterize so much of the daily life of institutions (Ball 1987; Gillborn 1994). The project took as its starting point the identification of schools that had established reputations (among the independent national schools inspectorate) for having made genuine progress in changing their assumptions and practice in view of ethnic diversity and antiracist goals. Two schools were eventually selected as case study sites: the first, *Mary Seacole Comprehensive* is a girls' school in the industrial midlands of England[1] . The student population is mostly working class. Around half the students are of South Asian ethnic origin, mainly with family roots in Pakistan and northern India. About one in three students are white, with just under one in five of black African Caribbean ethnic background. The second case study, *Garret Morgan Comprehensive*, is a coeducational school in the English South East. Here the students generally come from more affluent backgrounds. The school is predominantly white, although it has a history of attracting students from the city's Bangladeshi community, which suffers disproportionately high rates of unemployment. The latter currently account for about one in ten students.

The case study schools, therefore, serve markedly different student populations and local communities - in terms of social class, gender, ethnic and religious profiles. They share a common commitment to antiracism, however, and have moved beyond mere rhetorical pronouncements to address issues across 'the whole school': their antiracism is not restricted to a few areas of the curriculum or to 'special' projects. The schools are far from perfect: their antiracist developments have not always progressed smoothly; mistakes have been made; there is still much to be done. In comparison with most schools, however, these are unusual places, where antiracism has become a meaningful part of the lives of teachers and students.

The research aimed to record what had happened in the schools and deduce lessons from which others might learn: the intention was to explore the dynamics and micropolitics of antiracist change. I used a variety of qualitative approaches: most data were generated through semi-structured interviews (with a range of teachers and students). I also observed different aspects of school life and analyzed a variety of documentary materials, including school policy statements and minutes of staff meetings. My time in each school was restricted, but I was able to arrange many interviews in advance by working with an appointed 'liaison teacher' in each school. I visited the schools several times - working over successive days or using separate visits over a longer period. In both schools I was free to use teachers' commonrooms and to wander around as I pleased. This helped me make spontaneous contact with students and extend my range of staff 'informants'. All interviews were tape recorded. Detailed transcripts and field notes were entered into a computer for enhanced data management and coding using the constant comparative method.

Students as agents for antiracist change

Work in this field rarely acknowledges the importance of students as change agents; young people of minority ethnic origin are often cast in the role of powerless victims, while their white counterparts are projected as proto-racists (see Macdonald *et al* 1989). In contrast, students in Seacole and Morgan played a vital role in change processes. First, the students' enthusiasm for antiracist principles shifted the micropolitical ground so that teachers found it increasingly difficult to opt-out of the policy developments. Generally, when antiracist initiatives are first proposed, many teachers fear that they will simply 'stir up trouble' by emphasizing diversity and difference (see Troyna 1988). In both the case study schools, however, students were invited to contribute (formally and informally) to debates about the shape of emerging antiracist policies. As a teacher remarked, this created 'a buzz' - a sense of expectation among students that something was going to happen. In Seacole, for example, copies of a draft policy statement were circulated for all students to consider. Through both written responses and informal questioning of staff, students demonstrated a serious engagement with the issues that took many teachers by surprise and effectively answered concerns that they would dismiss the policy or use it simply as an excuse for disruption. As one teacher recalls:

They weren't just dismissive of it, they weren't saying, 'Oh, what do we want to know that for?'
It was all, 'That's good. That's interesting. We should have that'.
And they also had their own ideas.

This teacher's final sentence highlights a second way in which students play a vital role in the schools' developing antiracism: that is, *as critics*. Not as purely negative detractors, merely shooting holes in teachers' best efforts, but as people with antiracist sentiments and experiences of their own which sometimes highlight limitations or assumptions of which teachers are not aware. Students' written feedback on Seacole's first attempted antiracist policy, for example, was especially important. Several students gave strong support to the policy, and even called for harsher penalties against racism. However, they also sought to modify parts of the policy which they felt applied blanket condemnation to issues that should be seen within a particular context. A concern with the pronunciation of names and the composition of friendship groups was particularly prominent (see figure 1)[2]. Subsequently, a teachers' working party redrafted the policy, trying to respond positively to the issues that had been raised.

Figure 1 about here

Within Seacole many teachers view that period as an especially important phase in the school's recent history. But the construction of the written policy did not signal an end to the students' involvement as agents for antiracist change. In conversation with students it is clear that many continue to identify shortcomings in the teachers' actions. A measure of how far the schools have progressed is that when challenged most teachers now readily consider the students' views as a legitimate contribution - not an attempt to cause mischief (see Gillborn 1995a).

This situation took time to develop: when my fieldwork began the schools had been working on antiracism as a high profile issue for around five years. Initially, many staff were uncertain about how much weight should be attached to students' views - after all, teacher culture is often predicated on an assumption that pupils should listen and be still while teachers wield the power (Crozier 1994). Because of their emphasis on the importance of white racism, however, the teachers' initial attempts at antiracism led them to accord particular status to the views of black students. Indeed, for some teachers there came a point where any accusation of racism by a minority student might lead to a form of professional paralysis, where they felt unable (as whites) to deny the accusation - whatever the circumstance. This kind of situation quickly led to increased disquiet among the white students. In contrast to their minority peers, however, antiracism did not offer the white students a legitimate voice.

'But no-one asks about us': white students and antiracism

In both case study schools the antiracist changes were led by committed teachers who placed a premium on combating racism. They failed, however, fully to consider the role of white students, who began to question central tenets of the teachers' philosophies. In particular, white students pinpointed a shift in power that seemed to privilege minority perspectives and deny legitimacy to whites' experiences. This issue involves more than simple 'white defensiveness' - an attempt to retain privilege by masquerading as an oppressed group (Roman 1993). It arises from the multiple locations inhabited by white students as class, race, gender and sexual subjects: the assertion that whiteness ultimately defines them as powerful oppressors simply does not accord with the lived experience of many working class white students.

Analytically, white students occupy a somewhat ill-defined space in most of the literature on race and ethnicity in education. Research, whether in 'all-white' schools or more ethnically diverse contexts, tends to cast whites in the role of potential antagonist/racist rather than fellow antiracist (let alone 'victim'): This is hardly surprising since racism in schools (as elsewhere) is mostly supported and extended by the actions of white people (students and teachers). At the same time, however, it has always been clear that widespread progress depends on the actions of white people. Indeed, as antiracist analyses and pedagogies become more sophisticated, it is increasingly obvious that white students occupy a pivotal role: any genuine attempt to challenge racism in education must engage with their perspectives and experiences. This is as true in multiethnic schools (Macdonald *et al* 1989) as it is in all/mainly white contexts (Troyna and Hatcher 1992).

An example of what can happen where schools fail to take seriously the views and experiences of white students is provided by Mac an Ghaill's account of a group of white young men, of middle class

background, who view the simplistic and dogmatic antiracism of their parents and school as deeply hypocritical:

> Ben:
> The teachers and our parents when they talk about racism always say white people mustn't be racist to blacks. That's fine. But they won't say anything when Asians and black kids are racist to each other.
>
> Adam:
> And how come they keep on saying that racialism is really bad but we've had a load of hassle from black and Asian kids (...) But no-one asks about us. The older generation don't ask what it's like for us who have to live with a lot of black kids who don't like us. No-one says to the black kids, you have to like the whites. They'll tell them to fuck off.
>
> (Quoted in Mac an Ghaill 1994: 85)

Unless the views and experiences of minority *and* white students are taken seriously, attempts at antiracism may lurch towards the kind of doctrinaire 'moral' approach that has already been seen to operate disastrously in one English school - where the adoption of an oppressive and authoritarian version of antiracism polarized relations between students[3]. According to such approaches:

> Since the assumption is that black students are the victims of the immoral behaviour of white students, white students almost inevitably become the 'baddies'. The operation of the [doctrinaire 'moral'] anti-racist policies almost inevitably results in white students (and their parents) feeling 'attacked' and all being seen as 'racist', whether they are ferret-eyed fascists or committed anti-racists or simply children with a great store of human feeling and warmth who are ready to listen and learn and to explore their feelings towards one another. (Macdonald *et al* 1989: 347)

In considering the developments in my case study schools, I have already emphasized the important role played by student perspectives. The involvement of students (both formally and informally) is one of the means by which these schools started to move beyond simplistic and dogmatic 'moral' approaches to antiracism. Nevertheless, the schools were unprepared for the particular concerns of white students, many of whom began to complain that the antiracist policies were working solely against them. A teacher centrally involved in the developments in Morgan, for example, recalls:

> The feedback we had, as we put together the policy, was that it was all biased towards the Bangladeshi/black students, rather than the white students (...) And this was the feedback we got very strongly from the white kids: this system wasn't for them. And why were we doing this?

Similarly in Seacole Comprehensive:

> There was a big fight (...) about a black girl pushing another one and then the [white] girls say, 'There is nothing we can do or say to defend ourselves, because they know here that if it involves Asians and us... they won't listen to us'.

The white students' concerns resonated with the uncertainty experienced by many teachers - themselves deeply insecure about their ability to behave in ways that did not embody racist assumptions. The issue goes to the heart of a controversy in antiracist theorizing that is rarely addressed directly (by either practitioners or academics): in their attempts to combat racism, the schools had taken a position that essentialized white students and reduced their actions and perspectives solely to issues of colour. Rather than moralizing to the white students, about their guilt as whites in a racist society, or striking a dogmatic position, however, the teachers most involved in the antiracist initiatives recognized the need to work through the issues. In Morgan, for example, a group of teachers began to work closely with students, examining the workings of the school's antiracist policies. They tried to emphasize that white students *can* take advantage of the system if the need arises:

It enabled us to explain, go through the forms, and make them realize, in fact, it wasn't biased; it was actually a system for *any* group.

Despite these lessons, and the prominence given to the school's anti-harassment policies, teachers at Morgan feel it took three years fully to establish antiracism as a legitimate feature of the lives of white students.

The additional work that teachers had to undertake with white students shows the need for schools to stay responsive to all student perspectives. Rather than backing away from the changes, or simply asserting their value, here the teachers worked to involve white students and get beyond their initial sense of injustice. This is a crucial part of the antiracist changes in both case study schools.

There are some key issues here. The implementation of antiracist initiatives has led both schools to rethink their assumptions about students' role in policy making. Originally the schools tended to operate on the basis of traditional assumptions which position students as passive recipients of teachers' decisions. In working through the many issues thrown up by antiracism, however, the schools have effectively moved to a position where students are accepted as a legitimate voice in policy making and implementation. The schools' experiences with white students, in particular, challenge many tacit assumptions that have featured in earlier versions of antiracist theorizing. These same experiences, however, also highlight additional issues which have yet to be resolved.

The crisis of white ethnicity: conceptual issues in antiracism

The position of white students in the case study schools highlights several important issues that have rarely been given serious consideration by antiracists. Here I want to focus on two; the first concerns the definition of racism in school contexts and how this can be reconciled to wider analyses of race and racism in society. Second, the issue of white ethnicities has to be addressed.

White people in antiracist discourse

Through their practice, both case study schools have adopted a clear position on the complex and controversial issue of just *who* can be racist. A long established debate in British antiracism concerns the question of whether it is only white people who can be said to act in 'racist' ways. During the 1980s a convenient and oft-quoted means of coping with this issue was to adopt the slogan that *'Racism = Prejudice + Power'*. In an extreme form this definition holds that generally only white people hold power, therefore only white people can be racist. More subtly, some writers recognize that power means different things in different situations. Hence, while black and Asian people - as a group - can be said to be *relatively* powerless in Britain, in certain situations black and Asian individuals clearly exercise power; therefore, they have the potential to act in ways that are racist. This would apply to the school situation, for example, where black and Asian students may enjoy power through peer relations. This approach, however, is open to critique. Although 'Racism = Prejudice + Power' is a striking phrase, it dangerously oversimplifies the nature of labelling and social interaction in schools: many teachers who are not 'prejudiced' in any conventional sense, nevertheless act in ways that have racist consequences (Gillborn 1990). As Barry Troyna (1993) argues, antiracist analyses of power and racism have developed in an attempt to understand the complex and changing nature of racism in society. The formulaic approach to racism, and the use of 'institutional racism' as an ill-defined catchall concept, were criticized (Carter and Williams 1987; Troyna 1988; Troyna and Williams 1986; Williams 1985) long before more recent poststructuralist contributions (e.g. Cohen 1992; Rattansi 1992). Nevertheless, many antiracists (possibly fearing that such questions might weaken action against white racism) continue to dodge the question of whether whites can be victims of racism; others maintain simply that whites cannot be race victims because of the fundamental significance of 'the asymmetrical power relations between black and white' (Troyna and Hatcher 1992: 16).

In contrast, both case study schools have achieved an unusually high degree of commitment to antiracism and have found it necessary to adopt the position that *all* students (including whites) can potentially make use of the antiracist procedures. As I have noted, during the first stages of antiracist work, white students frequently raised issues of equality and argued that the moves were 'biased' against them. The schools' response, that the procedures *could* work just as well for white students, seems to have been significant. Similarly, it is important that they continue to deal consistently with accusations of racism - taking seriously white students' perspectives. In practice the procedures on racist harassment continue to be used almost exclusively against white aggression/racism; yet the schools' acceptance of the wider principle (that *'racism and ethnocentrism are not necessarily confined to white groups'* - Rattansi 1992: 36 original emphasis) has avoided 'moralizing' about white power in ways that do not make sense to many white students - especially those from working class backgrounds, for whom talk of

their being in a position of power might seem absurd. Although the case study schools have adopted this position mostly out of pragmatism, it echoes important advances in attempts to theorize racism and difference (see, for example, Donald and Rattansi 1992).

White ethnicity?

When we consider the position of white students in antiracist schools, a second vital conceptual issue arises: just what is the status of white ethnicity? Indeed, *is* there such a thing as white ethnicity? It could be argued, of course, that since ethnicity refers to a sense of cultural identity, the concept should not be linked to colour alone. Such a perspective would only allow white people *hyphenated* ethnic identities (where a link can be drawn to some more or less distant 'homeland'), such as Irish-American or Italian-American. This works for some groups in the US, but is not a common means of ethnic self-identification in Britain. In any case, what of white Americans who cannot claim such a dual identity: are they without ethnicity? Certainly this is the position that underlies a good deal of antiracist work in Britain, and especially England: white people are not considered in ethnic terms at all. This absence of ethnicity can, of course, be a source of power. One of the earliest uses of the word 'ethnic' was as a derogatory term denoting outsiders - 'heathens' or 'lesser breeds' (see Williams 1983: 119).

> 'White' sticks out like a sore thumb. Every one gets a geographical identity, it seems, but 'whites' ... It enables 'whites' alone to accrue the semi-mystical status of being a group without history or geography. For whilst 'South Asian' or 'African' can be broken down into numerous identities and a multitude of mutable histories, 'white' conveys the impression of homogeneity and stasis. When set in the midst of ethnic particularity, this dully monolithic and asocial character works to enhance the mythical connotations of superiority and purity that have so often surrounded notions of 'whiteness'. 'White' appears as the Other of ethnicity; a natural, transcendental state untainted by the swarming, thoroughly earth bound, histories and geographies that are so important to the categorisation of 'non-whites'. (Bonnett 1993: 175-6)

In this way, Bonnett argues, 'whites' draw strength from their 'non-ethnic' status. But there is another side to this. As Jennifer Gore reminds us, *'everything* is dangerous ... "liberatory" and "emancipatory" discourses have no guaranteed effects' (Gore 1993: xv, original emphasis). If multiculturalism/antiracism succeeds in deconstructing racist stereotypes and helping students genuinely to value the depth, variety and wealth of 'other' cultures, it might potentially expose a chasm where once dwelt 'whiteness'. This is especially so at a time when race and ethnic issues are increasingly in the public eye and consciousness. Hence, the very properties from which 'whiteness' conventionally draws strength in racist settings ('as the Other of ethnicity'), might expose whites to huge uncertainty - even a sense of loss - where antiracism begins genuinely to influence the language and practice of schooling.

In response to these issues a common reply might be, 'So what?' What does it matter if whites feel cheated by the multiplication of ethnicities and the new found currency of ethnic assertiveness and awareness? Well, it could matter a great deal. First, if antiracism is to succeed on any general scale, it must surely include valid roles for white people: it must find a way of conceptualizing race/ethnicity that does not reproduce the familiar racist line that, in the final analysis, 'whites are different'. Second, unless we find ways of articulating whiteness that are valued, diverse *and* antiracist, white students will continue to be easy prey to those who have no problem peddling simple, closed (racist) conceptions of whiteness.

This is a pressing problem. The political right have successfully appropriated many symbols of British (and especially English) ethnicity to their own ends. In the US too, the idea of 'un-American' activities clearly defines the 'true' American in politically specific colours. In Britain white students are as active as their minority peers in the creative renegotiation and reconstruction of ethnic identities; sometimes adapting minority symbols and 'styles' to new ends (see Back 1993; CME 1993; Hewitt 1986). At the same time, however, the right have begun to 'hijack' the very notion of 'Englishness'. As Stuart Hall notes, although capitalism and the market increasingly operate on a *global* scale, new and different forms of the *local* are developing. The latter include a renewed emphasis on ethnicity as a basis for group and individual identity that is at once political and cultural (Hall 1992a & b). Clearly antiracist teachers and schools have a crucial role to play in the search for positive elements of a white ethnicity - elements that challenge the right's 'revamped', 'aggressive' and absolutist 'little Englandism' (Hall 1992a: 308).

There is an immense wealth of anti-oppressive struggle in British and American history in which whites have played a central role, for example, concerning popular movements against the

exploitation of wage-labour. These highlight the complex and multifaceted nature of conflict and exclusion (especially via the operation of social class and gender). An urgent task for practitioners and theorists is to create ways of using this positively in the deconstruction of current fictions about a homogeneous white ethnicity, culture and nation. The political right are laying claim to the symbols and vocabulary of white identity to such an extent that white students struggle to find a legitimate anti-oppressive voice. Antiracists are increasingly encouraging greater critical awareness of difference and identity, but have yet to break with wider constructions of whiteness that (to many teachers and students) are still identified as inherently racist.

The dangers of 'rights for whites' discourses

> *No discourse is inherently liberating or oppressive. The liberatory status of any theoretical discourse is a matter of historical inquiry, not theoretical pronouncement.*
> (Sawicki 1988: 166. Quoted by Gore 1993: 50 original emphasis)

I have argued that antiracism, in its concern to identify and deconstruct white racism, has neglected the need to consider white ethnicity as part of the wider field of ethnic identifications and interactions. It is an argument that many will view with suspicion. Indeed, the history of anti-oppressive struggles (on both sides of the Atlantic) contains numerous examples of powerful groups seeking to adapt the language of liberation in an attempt to oppose change to the status quo. In Britain, for example, antiracists have continually to ensure that race issues remain on the agenda. Recent upheavals in the state education system have adopted a deracialized discourse that has all but obliterated race equality issues at the national policy level. In contexts such as this, it is reasonable to be skeptical about the priority that should be accorded concern for white students.

This is a complex arena - educationally and politically: in the contemporary interplay of race, class and gender politics, some of the very forces that would lead us, as antiracists, to oppose 'white defensiveness' (Roman 1993) should alert us to the need to take seriously the position of white students.

In many advanced capitalist societies there is a popular trend - encouraged by media hype and hysteria about 'political correctness' - to argue that whites have been victimized by civil rights legislation and attempts to fight social and educational disadvantage. The crusading tone of Herrnstein and Murray illustrates how this discourse seeks to capture the moral high ground by presenting the authors as heretics who dare to stand against the PC tide. They are clear about who has suffered in the past:

> To be intellectually gifted is indeed a gift. Nobody 'deserves' it. The monetary and social rewards that accrue to being intellectually gifted are growing all the time, for reasons that are easily condemned as being unfair. Never mind, we are saying. These gifted youngsters are important not because they are more virtuous or deserving but because our society's future depends on them. *The one clear and enduring failure of contemporary American education is at the high end of the cognitive ability distribution.* ... All that we ask is that educational leaders rededicate themselves to the duty that was once at the heart of their calling, to demand much from those fortunate students to whom much has been given (Herrnstein and Murray 1994: 442 & 445, emphasis added).

The late 1980s and early 1990s have seen the re-emergence into the political mainstream of neo-Nazi racist politics, in the US, UK and mainland Europe[1]. The Ku Klux Klan and British National Party (BNP), for example, have both achieved some success based on appeals to the idea that white culture and white interests have been sacrificed and should be defended. The BNP's election slogan, 'Rights for Whites', captures the powerful emotional appeal of the discourse.

In view of these developments it is not surprising that many antiracists feel uncomfortable about analyses that seek to establish the importance of white ethnicity and the perspectives of white students. However, it may be dangerously naive to assume that antiracism has nothing to learn from the fact that these discourses are growing, and that they seem increasingly to tap into contemporary issues as experienced and perceived by some whites. Unless antiracism begins constructively to engage with these issues, the way is left clear for others to exploit them to racist ends.

Conclusions

> There needs to be research on what happens when teachers work with multicultural education in their classrooms, what forms it takes and why, how students respond, and what barriers are encountered. (Sleeter & Grant 1990: 155)

Writing on multicultural education (in the United States, Britain and elsewhere) has tended to neglect questions of pedagogy and lived experience at the school and classroom level. I have tried to redress this by examining up-close the roles and perspectives of students in schools that have given multicultural issues high priority. The paper draws attention to the crucial role of students as potential change agents and adds to the emerging debate about 'whiteness' as ethnic construct and lived experience. The schools have tried to address the contradictions of their approaches; a process that further highlights the dynamic and multifaceted nature of identity and racism at the micro level. The schools (for reasons of pragmatism rather than theoretical elegance) have begun to recast their reforms so that, under certain circumstances, white students might also make use of them as racialized victims. In so doing, the schools are attempting to develop a form of antiracism that goes beyond the inverted racism and essentialism of previous models. They are beginning to work with more complex and fluid notions of race and identity that clearly articulate with contemporary theories of identity construction in late modernity. The process is slow and uncertain. Some genuine progress has been made, but the schools continue to struggle to find progressive and anti-oppressive articulations of white identity in general, and Englishness in particular, that are not circumscribed by wider processes of racist identification in the social formation.

The issues are complex and dangerous. The idea of 'white rights' is a prominent feature of racialized and racist discourses. And yet, unless antiracism takes seriously the position of white students, it risks alienating one of the groups most crucial to its eventual success.

Notes

1 All names, and certain other details, have been changed to maintain anonymity.

2 Most students chose to respond anonymously. It is not possible, therefore, to further analyze their written views, for example, by ethnicity or age.

3 Ian Macdonald and his colleagues Reena Bhavnani, Lily Khan and Gus John produced a detailed report on antiracism in a Manchester school (Burnage High) where an Asian student had been murdered by a white peer. They argue strongly for a more sophisticated version of antiracist practice that transcends the simple dualisms of the 'moral' and doctrinaire form practiced in Burnage.

4 The history of Europe, of course, provides horrifying evidence of the power of racism to mobilize against cultural (as well as colour) minorities.

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We thought of how we felt the school should respond to racist behaviour. All our ideas are included in the policy's list of procedures. We feel that sometimes parents do not always take such matters seriously enough, even when they are informed by letter.

We were a little concerned about the procedure on 'exclusive groupings'. We do not feel that friendship groups should be manipulated to produce an ethnic 'balance'; friends should be left to sort things out for themselves. However in a work situation, we are happy to mix freely and work with students from all backgrounds. Basically we didn't like the idea of someone telling us who our friends should be.

Teachers should be having discussions with pupils and how they feel, because pupils have been experienced about racism.

We agree with all that is said.

1. Victim support group.
2. Recording of racism more than 3 times out of school.
3. Monitors.
4. Parents meeting about racism.
5. Everybody should be informed more clearly about the A-R policy.

Just because we sit in groups does not mean we do not mix especially mix in PE + Drama.

If a group do not wish another to join them they should be told in front of everyone that they are being racist. The group should be split up and the 'unwanted' girl allowed to choose where she wishes to go.

The mispronunciation of names still occurs but it shouldn't be taken that seriously as it is a matter of learning how to say the names correctly.
Friendly jokes between friends in a group maybe taken as a joke within the group, but to outsiders it seems a serious offence.
Serious racist attacks should be dealt with a lot more severely by the teachers.

In the library there are loads of books written in English well I think there should be more written in Urdu or Punjabi...

Although we understand the reasoning of the anti-racist policy in Seacole, we feel that it is not being carried out to its full potential. (...) it states that Seacole School will not accept any form of racist behaviour. We feel that this is not true. Many girls every day in Seacole suffer racism in some form. We ourselves have been victims of racism in the five years of our educative lives at Seacole. (...) Although we are not contradicting the brochure, we are stating our feelings towards its contents. We also feel that the brochure will give people a 'chip on their shoulder' that everyone is being racist towards them.

Catalogue every racist incident. If perpetrator is same three times, automatic suspension.

1. Taking off [mimicking] other people's accents is a form of racism.
2. Mispronunciation of names only when deliberate or can't be bothered to try and learn the name.

Figure 1: STUDENT RESPONSES TO A DRAFT ANTIRACIST POLICY